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Regulating new Bottlenecks of Digital Television Distribution. An Analysis of the Policy Making Process in Switzerland

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Abstract: The contributions to this book approach communication and media policy in the era of the Internet from two perspectives: Theories and processes. Special attention is given, on the one hand, to the question of how communication policy-making is transformed due to technical evolution which is intertwined with social and economic developments. On the other hand, this book considers how these transformations can be studied and what insights are produced by distinct theoretical approaches.

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-87078>

Book Section

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Schweizer, Corinne (2013). Regulating new Bottlenecks of Digital Television Distribution. An Analysis of the Policy Making Process in Switzerland. In: Löblich, Maria; Pfaff-Rüdiger, Senta. Communication and Media Policy in the Era of the Internet : Theories and Processes. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 107-117.

How to Regulate new Bottlenecks of Digital Television Distribution? Media and Infrastructure Owners' Interests in the Reformation Process of the Swiss Radio and Television Act

Corinne Schweizer

1. Introduction

The digitization of broadcasting is well underway. Analogue (terrestrial) switch-off has already taken place in the US and most of the European countries. Yet digital television, irrespective of its mode of distribution, also poses new challenges. On the one hand, copyright holders, TV channels and infrastructure owners are given new opportunities for restricting what viewers can do (e.g. CI+). On the other hand, infrastructure owners (often having significant market power) may choose to create bottlenecks and restrict access to their platforms and facilities such as conditional access systems, application programming interfaces or electronic program guides. Given these potential conflicts, the adjustment of broadcasting regulation to the digital age is heavily contended.

However, while scholarly attention is often devoted to the results of regulatory reform, the policy process and the actors involved are rarely investigated in-depth. Only few studies focus on the interests and the influence of actors in communication policy-making, let alone in the area of digital television distribution and corresponding bottlenecks. In the present paper, focusing on the case of Switzerland, I will examine *which interests two groups of actors – media companies and owners of communication infrastructure – bring into the policy-making process and whether they are successful in shaping the reform of broadcasting regulation to their advantage*. By drawing on policy analysis, I investigate the different phases of the revision of the Swiss Radio and Television Act (RTVA) which recently came into effect. In what follows, I shortly discuss the application of the theory of policy analysis to the political system of Switzerland and present the propositions as well as the method employed. Then I present the results of the analysis before coming to a conclusion.

2. Theory of policy analysis and Swiss policy phases

Regulation is the result of different interests brought into a policy-making process by political, economic and societal actors. In order to analyze their respective influence it is not sufficient to merely focus on the output of the policy-making process alone, as communication-policy scholars often do. Rather, it is necessary also to investigate how different actors try to influence the policy-making process itself. Therefore, I draw on the theory of policy analysis. Following Dye (1976), Schubert and Bandelow (2003) argue that policy analysis focuses on what political actors do, why they do it and what difference it makes. In this perspective, politics is conceptualized as a decision-making-process that is divided into different phases. Based on Lasswell's (1970) seminal paper, many phase models have been developed (see for example Schneider & Janning, 2006, p. 50, Windhoff-Héritier, 1980). All of them begin with the definition of a problem and end with a political program (Werner & Wegrich, 2003).

When applying models of the policy cycle to Switzerland, it is necessary to take into account the peculiarities of the country's political system. On the one hand, Switzerland is a concordance democracy; on the other hand every federal act is subjected to a binding referendum, if at least 50.000 citizens sign a petition. This has crucial implications for the political decision making (Lüthi, 2006, p. 128; Klöti, 2006, pp. 155-158; Linder, 2006, pp. 105-107, 115). Sciarini (2006, pp. 429-516) divides the process of policy formulation in Switzerland into four phases:

- *Impulse Phase*: Based on input from political parties, associations and civil-society organizations, decision-making processes are usually initiated by state actors or by the Cantons.

- *Pre-Parliamentary Phase:* A group of experts within the administration develops a draft bill which is subjected to a public consultation. Political parties, interest-groups, the Cantons and ordinary citizens are asked to hand in written statements of opinion. This consultation aims at detecting whether the draft bill is considered feasible and broadly accepted. The submitted statements are evaluated by the administration before introducing a revised bill to the parliament.
- *Parliamentary Phase:* One of the houses of parliament begins with the reading of the bill. At first, it is treated by the responsible select committee; afterwards the house debates the propositions. Then, the second house follows the same procedure. If there are disagreements between the two houses, up to three rounds of reading are possible until a conciliation conference has to be held. Eventually, both houses have to pass the bill.
- *Referendum Phase:* After the parliamentary phase, citizens have the possibility to take a referendum.

Before implementation begins, the government has to pass an ordinance that concretizes the different provisions of the act. Sometimes, another public consultation is conducted. In the present paper, the *ordinance phase* will also be taken into account.

3. The reform of the Swiss Radio and Television Act

Due to the changing media environment, including digitization, the Swiss Radio and Television Act (RTVA) was completely revised between 1998 and 2006. The policy-making process consisted of the typical phases that the Swiss political system features (see section 2). Many different actors were involved in the reformation of the RTVA: The Federal Office of Communication (OFCOM) as regulatory agency, parliamentarians and other politicians, the Cantons and ordinary citizens. Of particular importance in this case is the participation for media and infrastructure owners. For both groups there was a lot at stake and it can be reasonably assumed that there are conflicting interests regarding almost every question of distribution regulation. One can expect that media companies are basically interested in a kind of regulation that guarantees access to the communication infrastructure for all stations in order to distribute their programs. Infrastructure owners, however, would normally oppose regulation that restricts their freedom of action and prefer a market solution (Gourd, 2002, pp. 171, 179).

P 1: Owners of the distribution infrastructure argue against a regulation of digital television distribution and in favor of a free market solution.

P 2: Owners of media companies argue in favor of a regulation of digital television distribution that assures open access for their programs to networks and facilities.

Given the social, cultural and political importance of the media (Ó Siochrú & Girard, 2002; Feintuck & Varney, 2006), access of citizens to a wide range of programs is considered vital for a democratic system. On the one hand, it is often argued that regulation of all networks and facilities is necessary to guarantee citizens' access to public service channels (Berger & Schoenthal, 2005, pp. 17-19, 37-38). On the other hand, access regulation reaching beyond competition law is deemed as necessary in order to prevent owners of the infrastructure from abusing their market power (Schulz, Seufert & Holznagel, 1999, p. 76; Gourd, 2002, pp. 178-184, Hoffmann-Riem, 2000, p. 13). Thus it can be argued that regulation should ensure that all programs are treated in an equal, adequate and non-discriminatory way (Weber & Dörr, 2001, p. 69). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the public interest in distribution regulation considerably overlaps with the private interests of media owners, as opposed to those of the infrastructure owners.

P 3: As the interests of media owners overlap with the public interest in distribution regulation, they have a better chance of achieving their political objectives.

In order to investigate the RTVA revision, a *qualitative analysis of documents* was performed (Mason, 2002, pp. 103-119; Mayring, 2007; Silverman, 2001, pp. 119-123). Aside from various versions of the bill, confidential minutes of relevant select committees, official proceedings of parliamentary sessions

as well as statements of interest groups made during public consultations were analyzed¹ using a method of deductive content categorization (Mayring, 2007; Mason, 2002, pp. 150-165). Categories were developed with respect to different bottlenecks and regulatory options. In recent literature on regulation of digital television distribution (Berger & Schoenthal, 2005; Gorini & van Eijk, 2005; Gourd, 2002; Hoffmann-Riem, 2000; Puppis, 2010; Scheuer & Knopp, 2004; Schulz, Seufert & Holznagel, 1999; Weber & Dörr, 2001) there is no widely accepted classification of potential digital *bottlenecks*. I decided to concentrate on these six: general access to distribution networks, multiplexing, packetizing, set-top-box/API, conditional access, and navigation². Regarding the regulation of these bottlenecks, scholars propose a range of instruments: Among others, must-carry rules, anti-discrimination rules, price regulation, unbundling rules, technical standards or obligations for interoperability are suggested.

4. Results

The following results are structured according to the phases of the Swiss policy-making process discussed above. Every phase is presented in the following way: First, the regulatory document, or rather the alterations to the previous version are presented. Afterwards, it is discussed how the adopted regulatory decisions came into being.

4.1 Impulse phase: Discussion paper and RTV Draft

In January 2000, the Swiss government published a discussion paper regarding the revision of the Federal Act on Radio and Television (RTVA) containing general guidelines for distribution regulation and an instruction to launch the revision. One year later, the Federal Department of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC) compiled a preliminary draft of the bill, including explanatory notes. Concerning *access to distribution* DETEC suggested to maintain must-carry rules for programs of the public service broadcaster SRG SSR as well as for local, regional and foreign programs which provide “special achievements in the public interest” (RTV draft Art. 40, 41, 44, 51(1), 52). Telecommunication service providers would have to distribute these programs through terrestrial networks “in adequate quality” (RTV draft Art. 51(1)) for a “cost-based” compensation (RTV draft Art. 51(2)). In cable, programs of the SRG SSR would have to be transmitted free of charge, as long as this obligation would not constitute an “unreasonable economic burden” for the telecommunications service provider (RTV draft 41).

Concerning the new digital bottlenecks, DETEC proposed an anti-discrimination rule for all technical appliances or services of “*processing*” (e.g. multiplexing, packetizing, encrypting, marketing or selecting programs). That is, processing has to be executed on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms (RTV draft Art. 54(1)). DETEC also suggested that *navigation* systems must display the channels of the public broadcaster SRG SSR in the first stage of use (RTV draft Art. 54(2)). Furthermore, the Government would have the right to decide that programs considered to be of special value (SRG SSR, local, regional and foreign public service programs) must be transmitted on preferred channel positions (RTV draft Art. 56). Finally, when programs are offered as *bundled packages* in technical multiplex or for marketing purposes, third parties must be enabled to broadcast programs individually (RTV draft Art. 55).

4.2 Pre-parliamentary phase

The pre-parliamentary phase started with a public consultation. More than 200 actors took part and submitted their statements regarding the draft. Among them were several media organizations and the

¹ Most of the analysed documents are available on www.bakom.admin.ch.

² In discussion and legislation the new digital platforms and services (multiplexing, packetizing, set-top-box/API, conditional access and navigation) have often been subsumed under the general term processing.

most important infrastructure owners. When preparing the bill, DETEC considered many suggestions brought in during the public consultation.

4.2.1 RTV Bill

In the RTV bill must-carry rules for *distribution* in cable were expanded to all licensed programs (RTV Bill Art. 65(1), 68(1) and (2)) and all must-carry rules include now services that are linked to licensed programs (RTV Bill Art. 65 (3), 68(6)). Price regulations were retained or broadened: In terrestrial networks, all licensed broadcasting channels have to be distributed for a preferential price (“cost-oriented”) (RTV Bill Art. 65(2)), while the distribution via cable has to be free of charge, if this does not constitute an “unacceptable economic burden” for the cable network operator (RTV Bill Art. 68(3) and (5)). Furthermore, broadcasters without a license are given the possibility for must-carry status if they “contribute notably to the constitutional performance mandate” and if it is reasonable considering the technical capacity and economic situation of the infrastructure owner (RTV Bill Art. 69(1)) even though they have to recompense the provider (RTV Bill Art. 69(2)). Moreover, telecommunications operators must reserve enough capacity for broadcasting (RTV Bill Art. 64(1) and (2)). The revised bill also contains a new anti-discrimination rule for distribution: Access conditions therefore have to be equal, adequate and non-discriminatory (RTV Bill Art. 61(2)).

Meanwhile, the already existing anti-discrimination rule for *processing* (e.g. multiplexing, packetizing, encrypting, marketing or selecting programs) (RTV Bill Art. 71(1)) was expanded to linked services e.g. information for electronic program guides (RTV Bill Art. 71(4)). Furthermore, not only programs of Public Broadcaster SRG SSR must be displayed in the first stage of using a *navigation* system, but also local/regional licensed programs (RTV Bill Art. 71(2)). Also the regulation of *packetizing* was extended: “Unbundling” does not only have to be technically possible but has also to be feasible in an inexpensive way. Additionally, the unbundling rule is no longer limited to programs but can also be applied to packetized appliances and services, if diversity of opinions is at stake (RTV Bill Art. 73(1) and (2)). Finally, the bill contains a completely new article regarding the interoperability of different processing systems: If the diversity of opinions is at stake, the Government can specify *open interfaces* for appliances or services (RTV Bill Art. 72).

4.2.2 Whose positions got implemented? Whose did not?

Comparing the statements of media and infrastructure owners during the public consultation reveals that the media were much more successful in influencing distribution regulation. As demanded by the media, the bill contains additional price regulation of distribution in cable, new must-carry rules and a provision for the reservation of sufficient capacity for broadcasting. Also their claim to broaden the regulation of program presentation in navigation systems was considered. The new anti-discrimination rule for distribution corresponds to a position expressed by both media and infrastructure owners. Other interests of infrastructure owners remained unheard: Their plea to deregulate distribution and processing by eliminating must-carry rules or limiting must carry-rules to the Public Service Broadcaster SRG SSR was not considered. Neither did they have success with their claim to abstain from anti-discrimination rules or price regulations in distribution or processing.

Packetizing of programs proved to be a special case: While a TV channel and a Pay-TV provider wanted to avoid an obligation to “unbundle” program-bouquets, an association for critical media use as well as a cable network owner were in favor of the subsequent regulation.

4.3 Parliamentary phase

After the public consultation, the government introduced the RTV bill to the parliament. The two chambers of the parliament – the National Council and the Council of States – required three rounds of reading the bill until they adopted the new RTVA. Before parliamentary debates, the respective select committees met and prepared their propositions. In some of these meetings, representatives of media and infrastructure organizations were invited to present their view once more.

4.3.1 Final Radio and Television Act

A comparison of the final act and the bill shows that there are not many differences regarding distribution regulation. Nevertheless, a few important changes were made by Parliament: Firstly, cable network operators can decide themselves on the *distribution* of programs without must-carry status, and the financial compensation for the distribution may take into account the broadcaster's economic benefit (RTVA 2006 Art. 61). Secondly, broadcasters are not entitled to operate their own appliances for *processing* if the appliances used by infrastructure owners correspond to the state of technology (RTVA 2006 Art. 63(1)). Thirdly, if the Government stipulates open interfaces, it has to adequately consider appliances and services already existing on the market (RTVA 2006 Art. 64).

4.3.2 Whose positions got implemented? Whose did not?

The National Council was the first chamber to discuss the RTV Bill. In the preparatory meetings of its Selects Committee, invited representatives of two infrastructure companies could assert a new article: Cable network operators can decide on their own whether they have the technical capacity to distribute channels without must-carry-status and that the financial compensation for such distribution may take account of the broadcaster's economic benefit of the distribution (RTV Bill NC1 Art. 70a). However, their proposition to limit must-carry rules was not implemented.

When the Council of States took over the draft bill, it deleted the new article introduced by the National Council regarding access conditions for non-licensed channels to cable networks (RTV Bill CS1 Art 70a). Instead, an invited representative of a regional television association could achieve that the distribution of programs with temporary access rights has to be for free (RTV Bill CS 1 Art. 69(2)). Furthermore, the Council of States added to the bill that the Government has to define a precise number of programs with temporary must-carry-status (RTV Bill CS1 69(1b) – both media and infrastructure representatives wanted this.

In the second and third reading of the RTV Bill no more representatives were invited to the meetings of selects committees. Concerning digital distribution regulation, there was only one point at issue between the two chambers: the new article about the criteria for the decision about the distribution. Finally, the Council of States accepted it during the third reading (RTV Bill CS3, p. 69a).

In sum, during the parliamentary phase, the influence of the two groups of actors proved to be equal.

4.4 Ordinance phase: from draft to RTV Ordinance

As no referendum was taken, DETEC published a draft version of a new Radio and Television Ordinance (RTVO) corresponding to the revised RTVA. Again, a public consultation was held and once more almost 200 actors handed in written statements. In spring 2007, RTVA and RTVO became effective.

4.4.1 Draft and final version of Ordinance

The draft version of the ordinance contained a provision dealing with open interfaces for the digital TV distribution. It specifies interoperability of different processing systems (RTVO Draft Art. 52(1)). In addition, the draft also provides some explanations of terms used in the RTVA, as for instance “cost-oriented” or “adequate quality” (RTVO Draft Art. 41; 42). The latter is defined as “in real time, unmodified and complete”. Concerning quality, DETEC is authorized to specify different technical requirements according to different programs and distribution channels, but has to consider international norms. Furthermore, DETEC can denominate up to 30 digital TV programs that may benefit from must-carry status (RTVO Draft Art. 49). DETEC is also responsible for deciding on preferential channel positions in cable networks (RTVO Draft Art. 51).

In the final version of the ordinance, the regulation of digital TV distribution remained largely the same – despite the public consultation. The only change is a new paragraph regarding open interfaces: DETEC is authorized to declare open interfaces as mandatory given that there is an international standard and that this is necessary to safeguard the diversity of opinions (RTVO 2007 Art. 56(2)).

4.4.2 Whose positions got implemented? Whose did not?

Neither the media organizations nor the infrastructure owners had a major influence on the final version of the RTVO, even though they brought in many detailed statements. Finally, only DETEC's authorization to declare open interfaces mandatory if necessary, brought in by actors of both groups, was implemented.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, the regulation of potential bottlenecks in digital television distribution in Switzerland has been analyzed. Concretely, I investigated the influence of two groups of actors – media companies and infrastructure owners – during the reformation of the Act on Radio and Television (RTVA). Therefore, the different phases of the policy making process were retraced.

An analysis of documents showed that many media organizations and the most important infrastructure owners used public consultations and hearings to feed their interests into the policy making-process. As expected, the interests of both groups of actors were conflicting in respect of almost every aspect of regulation.

The analysis backs the first and the second proposition. While media organizations mostly argued in favor of a specific regulation of access to networks and facilities, infrastructure owners generally were in favor of a market solution. Media organizations supported the implementation of must-carry and anti-discrimination rules, price regulations and a regulation of navigation systems. At the same time, infrastructure owners opposed most of these regulations. There are only few exceptions: Some infrastructure owners were in favor of unbundling rules because they wanted to have the possibility to broadcast single programs from multiplexes or bouquets separately. Media organizations, on the contrary, objected such rules. Furthermore, some infrastructure owners were in favor of open interfaces or technical standards to guarantee interoperability, with most media organizations opposing such regulations.

The third proposition that media owners' interests are more in line with the public interest and that they therefore have a better chance of reaching a favorable regulation can be substantiated as well. The changes made to the bill after the public consultation in the pre-parliamentary phase (an anti-discrimination rule for distribution including linked services, a price regulation for distribution in cable networks, the reservation of sufficient capacity for broadcasting or the broadening of the regulation of program presentation) clearly overlapped with the demands of media organizations. In the parliamentary phase, the consideration of interest of media and infrastructure owners were balanced: On the one hand, distribution of programs without must-carry status has to be free of charge but on the other hand, infrastructure owners can decide on distribution with respect to technical capacity and the economic benefit of the broadcaster. In the ordinance phase, only a provision to regulate open interfaces for processing was inserted. Actors of both groups were in favor of this idea.

Policy analyses help us to understand how regulatory measures come into being. In the case of the reformation of the RTVA, this analysis shed light on the influence of powerful media organizations and infrastructure companies on the policy making process. We could see that there were calls of infrastructure owners to deregulate television distribution, but they were not successful. It remains an open question whether this is due to public interest considerations of government and parliament or due to the successful lobbying of broadcasters for their private interests.

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This version of the book chapter was accepted for publication in Löblich, Maria/Pfaff-Rüdiger, Senta (2013): Communication and Media Policy in the Era of the Internet. Theories and Processes. Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 107-117. The final publication is available at <https://www.nomos-shop.de/L%C3%B6blich-Pfaff-R%C3%BCdiger-Communication-Media-Policy-Era-of-Internet/productview.aspx?product=19687>.

Diese Version des Buchkapitels wurde akzeptiert für eine Publikation in Löblich, Maria/Pfaff-Rüdiger, Senta (2013): Communication and Media Policy in the Era of the Internet. Theories and Processes. Baden-Baden: Nomos, S. 107-117. Die finale Publikation ist erhältlich unter <https://www.nomos-shop.de/L%C3%B6blich-Pfaff-R%C3%BCdiger-Communication-Media-Policy-Era-of-Internet/productview.aspx?product=19687>.